

Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

Ag 847
No. 1134

W.
1943

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

FARMERS' BULLETIN No. 1134

CASTRATING AND DOCKING LAMBS



THE LARGEST PART of the returns from farm flocks comes from the sale of lambs.

That this income may be as large as possible, it is necessary to have the lambs in the best practicable market condition.

Ram lambs and undocked lambs are usually discriminated against on the markets, because they lack a uniform and attractive appearance and, in the case of uncastrated males, because they usually produce, under corresponding conditions, less satisfactory or lower grade carcasses than do ewe and wether lambs.

Flocks containing ram lambs usually make smaller weight and flesh gains than do flocks of ewe and wether lambs.

This bulletin tells how the operation of castration and docking can be done safely and effectively on the farm.

Washington, D. C.

Issued June 1920
Revised February 1943

CASTRATING AND DOCKING LAMBS

By D. A. SPENCER, *senior animal husbandman, Animal Husbandry Division, Bureau of Animal Industry, Agricultural Research Administration*, and E. W. BAKER, *formerly senior marketing specialist, Bureau of Agricultural Economics*¹

CONTENTS

	Page		Page
Essentials in the production of a good lamb carcass.....	1	Castrating and docking usual in range flocks.....	3
Castrating and docking now general practice.....	2	Methods of castration.....	4
Trade practices.....	2	Methods of docking.....	7

ESSENTIALS IN THE PRODUCTION OF A GOOD LAMB CARCASS

THE SHEEP INDUSTRY depends upon the sale of the lambs produced by the flock for a large part of its returns. As the meat-production phase of the industry is of major importance in wartime,

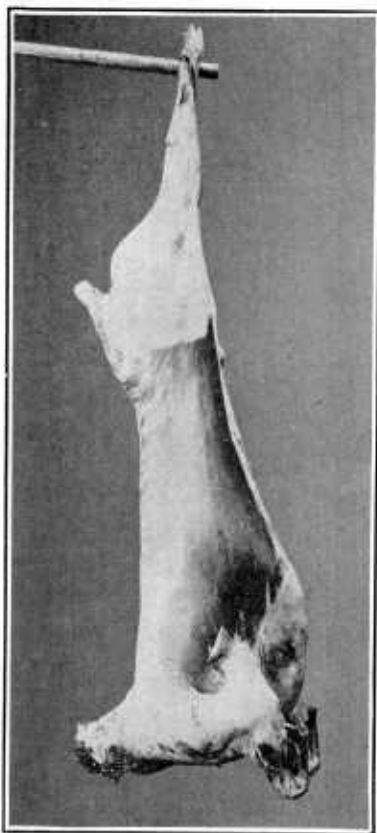


FIGURE 1.—Which carcass do you prefer?

Wether carcass, smooth in the shoulder, short in neck, deep and thick over loin and in the leg, well finished and uniformly covered.

Bucky carcass, coarse in neck and shoulders, light in loin and leg, lacks covering and proper finish.

¹ G. H. Bedell, joint author of the original bulletin, resigned from the Bureau of Animal Industry in 1920.

it has considerable influence on the profits. Three essentials are necessary to produce desirable market lambs in the flocks—good breeding and proper feeding, docking, and castration of the males. As a rule the most desirable and therefore the most profitable lamb carcasses are produced from lambs that have been castrated, and all lambs should be docked for sanitary reasons and to improve their appearance (fig. 1).

A farmer does not market his bull calves as bulls, nor his boar pigs as boars. Why, therefore, should he market his male lambs as rams rather than as wethers? Upon the general practice of castration in the farm flocks hinge larger profits and a more general success. But the castration of males and the docking of lambs must be done at the right time.

CASTRATING AND DOCKING NOW GENERAL PRACTICES

Improvement in the appearance and condition of market lambs from native or farm flocks (lamb marketings) has come about mainly because producers have given more attention to the castration of the males and the docking of the lambs.

TRADE PRACTICES

Generally speaking, all species, classes, and grades of livestock are bought and sold according to their merits as judged by their apparent ability to answer the intended purposes. In the case of lambs bought for slaughter, the quality or grade of the carcasses they will produce and the dressed weight of such carcasses in proportion to the live



FIGURE 2.—Cutting off end of scrotum.

weight of the animals are of primary importance to the purchaser. Also the appearance of the live lambs is a factor affecting their value. A load of lambs that are all neatly docked and with no buck lambs included will always sell better than another load which includes a lot of lambs with long tails and uncastrated lambs, even though the latter lot may dress out as well as the former.



FIGURE 3.—Testicles exposed.

It is the prevailing practice at most market centers to discount buck lambs in all shipments after a given date regardless of the quality of the lambs. This discount is usually \$1 per hundredweight.

This practice of discounting uncastrated lambs is general at live-stock markets. The discount usually becomes effective between May 1 and June 1 and is used strictly thereafter throughout the year.

CASTRATING AND DOCKING USUAL IN RANGE FLOCKS

The custom of docking all lambs and castrating the males, other than those retained for breeding purposes, is almost universal in the range flocks. This is generally believed to be the reason that lambs produced on the western ranges have usually outsold natives or farm-flock lambs on the slaughter market. Within the last few years, however, since the practice of docking native lambs and castrating the males has become much more general, the price premium formerly

brought by range lambs over ewe and wether native lambs of corresponding weight and grade has practically disappeared on most markets. Well-bred and well-finished ewe and wether farmflock lambs now frequently sell at the same prices as top consignments from the range and sometimes at higher prices. It is true that uniformity in breeding, in the great majority of instances, favors western-range lambs, but it is certain that had the flockmasters of the West not found castration and docking to be profitable these practices would not be so generally followed in that great lamb-producing region.



FIGURE 4.—Pulling out testicles with adhering cords.

METHODS OF CASTRATION

Castration is not dangerous if care is used. It can be done by any careful person who will follow directions. Lambs should be castrated when they are from 7 to 14 days old. Choose a bright day; do not castrate lambs on a damp, chilly, or rainy day. Select from the flock all lambs that are to be castrated and fence them off so they can be caught without undue excitement. Never worry or chase lambs before performing the operation. Provide a clean stall or pen for them to go back to after the operation. The operator's hands must be clean and the knife disinfected.

The lamb should be held against the body, as shown in figure 2. Cut off the lower one-third of the scrotum, or bag, so as to permit drainage. Then expose the testicles, as shown in figure 3, and with the left hand force them out, holding them in this position by a firm grip between the thumb and fingers, which are held close to the abdomen of the lamb. Next, grasp the testicles firmly between the thumb and fingers of the right hand, as in figure 4, and draw them out with the adhering cords. The work should be done quickly but



FIGURE 5.—Applying an antiseptic.

not roughly, and the testicles and adhering cords should be drawn out with a steady pull. The wound should then be washed with a good antiseptic, such as a weak carbolic solution, or a creolin or lysol preparation, as shown in figure 5.

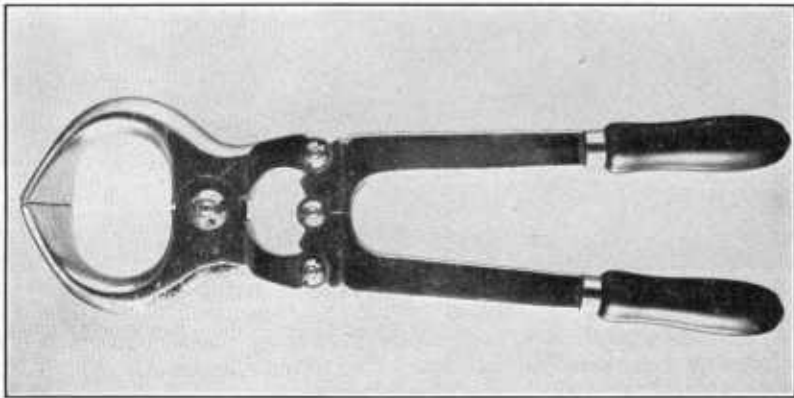


FIGURE 6.—Type of pincers used for bloodless castration. The jaws of the pincers do not come entirely together and therefore do not break the skin.

When lambs are more than 3 weeks old before the operation is performed, the cords should not be pulled out but should be scraped off with a knife back of the testicle. The scraping is done to prevent excessive bleeding.

Lambs should be kept quiet after they have been castrated. It is best to perform the operation in the morning, so that they can be watched during the day and attention given any that become too weak from loss of blood.



FIGURE 7.—Docking with heated chisel.

A bloodless method of castration in which special pincers (fig. 6) are used is sometimes advocated. The pincers crush the cord but do not break the skin. When properly performed, this is a very satisfactory method of castrating. However, the proper use of instruments of this type requires more than average skill, and unless the operation is effective much damage may be done when the male lambs are permitted to run with the flock after treatment. For this reason the bloodless method is not generally advocated as a farm practice. However, for the castration of mature animals, or for use in sections of the country in which screwworms are prevalent, these instruments

are especially desirable. Since the usual operation under those conditions entails a certain amount of risk, bloodless castration is strongly recommended, even if the services of a veterinarian or someone else experienced in using this type of instrument are not available.



FIGURE 8.—Equipment for docking with heated irons.

METHODS OF DOCKING

If care is used, lambs can be docked at the same time they are castrated. If both operations are performed at the same time, labor is saved, as the lambs will have to be caught only once. It should be a uniform practice to dock when the lambs are from 7 to 14 days old.

The lamb's tail renders no substantial benefit to the animal. On the contrary, its presence is injurious because of the filth that accumulates around and beneath it. Moreover, lambs are more attractive, and they look deeper in the leg and twist if the tail is docked. Females with full-length-tails are likely to fail to breed.

Usually the best way to dock a lamb is with the hot docking chisel (fig. 7). For best results the chisel should be heated only to a cherry-red color, as lambs bleed when the chisel is too hot.

Other methods of performing this operation are the use of docking irons (figs 8 and 9) or a sharp knife.

When hot docking pineers or docking chisels are properly used, no danger need be feared from loss of blood. Old sheep can be docked successfully in this way. The pineers should be heated to a cherry-red heat, not hotter, and the tail seared off 1 to 1½ inches from the body (fig. 9). The wound will be seared over and no blood lost. When the irons are used at proper temperature the

wound will heal satisfactorily, but probably not so quickly as when the knife is used. The wound is also sterilized and needs no further attention except in warm weather, when some standard preparation for repelling flies should be used. When the lambs are in a pen near at hand, with one man to catch them and another to hold them,



FIGURE 9.—Docking with heated irons.

from 9 to 12 lambs can be docked without heating the irons again. The lambs should be watched for a few days to see that they are recovering from the operation satisfactorily.

When docking with the knife, the operator, by feeling on the inside of the tail, first locates the joint to be cut, which is about $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches from the body. He should then push the skin on the tail back toward the body of the lamb so as to leave some surplus skin to grow over the stub. The cut should be made quickly from the underside of the tail toward the top or wooly side. If the lamb should bleed too much a piece of cord may be tied very tightly on the stub of the tail close to the body, to stop the bleeding, but the cord must be removed in a few hours or the tail will slough off.